

SPECIAL EVENTS

*The Faculty of Music,
University of Toronto*

*Concert Hall,
Edward Johnson Building*

ORFORD STRING QUARTET

Andrew Dawes, Violin

Terence Helmer, Viola

Kenneth Perkins, Violin

Marcel St-Cyr, Cello

Thursday, April 6, 1967

8:30 p.m.

Programme

QUARTET IN G MAJOR (K. 387) - - - - - Mozart

Allegro vivace assai

Menuetto

Andante cantabile

Molto allegro

The first of the Opus X quartets bears out Mozart's statement (in the dedicatory letter to Haydn) that these pieces were 'the fruit of long and laborious study'. The music is highly polished throughout, and its style is unified by a certain ornateness of the themes, and by recurring chromatic-scale passages found in all four movements, which deepen the expression. Also notable is the profusion of dynamic markings: midway in the second theme of the opening movement, and again in a principal motif of the Minuet, Mozart writes 'p' and 'f' over single notes of a passage; his string phrasing, too, has rarely been indicated in such detail.

The comparison of the sonorous opening theme to its restatement later on in the first movement is a good guide to the style of these remarkable quartets. Two details to be noted especially are the chromatic endings added to the phrases on their second appearance and the addition in the reprise of a completely new interjection of one bar, pianissimo, which alters the sense of the harmony in a very subtle way. The development makes considerable play of a little martial closing theme — it is characteristic of Mozart to choose for his brief developmental passages some of the less significant fragments of his material.

The Minuet is one of the most elaborately constructed in all the chamber music of this composer. It is in full sonata form, with two thematic sections, prose-like arrangement of sentences, and a fair amount of motivial development, all in the framework of the classical minuet (though apparently intended to be played a little faster than the traditional dance). The trio has the 'vigorous exaltation' associated with so many of Mozart's G minor compositions. Wide striding intervals characterize most of the motifs.

The slow movement, an ornate, aria-like affair in C major, is rather like the one Beethoven later wrote for his Piano Sonata Opus 31, No. 1. Features of particular beauty are the cello phrase just at the end of the opening melody (notable because of what happens to it in the restatement later), and the melancholy triplet figure (in the unexpected minor dominant) which begins the second theme. When this same theme turns to major, there comes a passage of soft melodic reflectiveness which is likely to prove problematical for North American music lovers, because it is so close to the musical vocabulary of our protestant hymn tunes. Early 19th-century hymn books published hereabouts show that Haydn and Mozart slow movements were in fact the source of many of these tunes. It seems a double pity: we have both lost the sense of what might have moved early hearers to put religious words to these tunes (they have meanwhile been so badly imitated), and at the same time find it hard to listen to the original music free of these associations.

The witty finale owes its effectiveness to an ingenious juxtaposition of learned fugal writing and the most light-hearted clichés of the opera buffa style. It contains two fugal expositions, one in the first theme and one in the second; later their subjects combine; the first one, which dominates the movement, is similar to that of the famous 'Jupiter' finale. In complete contrast to these sections are tunes and passage work in the purest buffo idiom, accompanied not polyphonically but in plain basic harmonies. The most extensive of these is an almost vulgar tune presented and elaborated by the first violin. Wyzewa and Saint-Foix note that the cadence-theme (deliciously extended on its later return) foreshadows a trio in *The Magic Flute*. The development, suggesting darker colors, opens with an extraordinary chromatic passage which Mozart rewrote several times because of the difficulties it caused him. The

recapitulation is considerably curtailed, there being no need to 're-expose' the fugal subjects with the voices entering one by one as before. The coda refers to the dark chromatic motifs and presents the first fugal subject once more, this time in close stretto.

QUARTET No. 2 (Op. 17) - - - - - Bartók

Moderato

Allegro molto capriccioso

Lento

String quartet writing held the same central position and personal emphasis in Bartók's work as it had in Beethoven's. Bartók's six quartets, like Beethoven's seventeen, form a particular intimate and revelatory guide to their composer's creativity in general. The two great formative experiences of Bartók's early maturity are the impressionism of Debussy on the one hand, and, on the other, the rhythmic and modal accents of the Hungarian folk music he had been collecting and studying with Kodály's collaboration. In the opinion of Halsey Stevens (*The Life and Music of Béla Bartók*), the Second Quartet differs from the First (Opus 7) in that it "sublimates the impressionistic elements and brings to the fore the more indigenous ones." "The whole direction of Bartók's later writing," Prof. Stevens considers, "might be deduced" from the Second Quartet. (Though it took some years gaining performances, it was, he notes, the first of Bartók's works ever to be recorded — in 1924 — and remains the most frequently played of the composer's six quartets.)

The particular signposts the Quartet provides lie in the tonal freedom of its language, the tragic and expressionistic intensity of its moods, and its unique coordination of the influences of personality and environment. The language is anchored to tonal centres — the Quartet is officially "in A minor" — but its details now audacious departures both from traditional classical practice and from the postromantic idiom of surging semitones we find epitomized in Strauss. The semitone with Bartók is usually a grinding or clashing of two parts rather than the constant interval-step of each separate part. He incorporates also leaps and scale-steps out of the vocabulary of Balkan and Near-Eastern folk musics (which he had found to be closely inter-related) — hollow tritones, which run all through this quartet, and snake-charming augmented seconds. In mood, the Second Quartet rises from pessimism to wide-eyed whirling-dervish excitement and elation, subsiding in an even more desolate pessimism. The finale, the most starkly-phrased of the three movements, is also the most daring in its treatment of dissonance, Matyás Seiber characterizes its mood as one of "utter desolation." One is reminded of the eyes which gaze out from the Bartók photographs — sad, clear, piercingly intense, yet suggesting deep humanity and kindness. That Bartók appears here, perhaps for the first time in a major work, as both an individual artist and (consciously and proudly) a product of his native soil, in itself makes the Second Quartet an important achievement in twentieth-century music. Among his contemporaries, perhaps only Manuel de Falla and (at his best) Ralph Vaughan Williams can compare with him in this. The point of view represented is that individual expression stems from racial (one might almost say geological) memory, and from generations of aural associations of a tribe, nation, or culture. This is an attitude which manifests itself not in the quotation of actual folk melodies and dances but rather in the use of abstracted rhythms and scales and cadence-formulas, bound together in a personal, sophisticated, deeply-thought-out style. One fortunate aspect of Bartók's experience, of course, is that the Hungarian soil happens to be musically an extraordinarily rich one.

The three movements of the Quartet reverse the classical order, in their slow-fast-slow sequence of tempi. The opening movement bears resemblances to the classical sonata-allegro, but the first theme has an "improvisatory" quality quite different from that of classical thematic phrases. Tritones and

solid semitones predominate, and curious new scales are heard doubled in grinding Bartókian chords. A cadential theme of modal coloring reveals its folk origins more fully when, on restatement, it assumes a new mandolin-like accompaniment.

The second movement is not so much a dance-rondo as a dance-fantasy or perhaps a condensation of several movements of a dance-suite (the composer's later *Dance Suite* for orchestra comes to mind). Constantly recurring characteristics are the hurdy-gurdy drone, the hypnotic repeated-note patterns and the subtle "parlando-rubato" of the indigenous Balkan dance forms. One vivid passage suggests a quality of alcoholic unevenness in the midst of all the elation — and one recalls that the dance of the village drunkard is a frequently-met-with idiom in this folk repertoire (several samples exist in arrangements and adaptations by Bartók himself). The unison prestissimo passage which ends the movement has astonishing force and is at the same time perfectly geared to the quartet medium.

The brooding finale is built up in snips and blotches — little dialogues, recitatives, muted fragments of what sounds like a hymn-tune. Prof. Stevens observes references to the main motive of the first movement in a cello passage here. The group-glissando, which reappears in so much of Bartók's later string music, makes itself heard. The central motive, a simple gesture of a minor third (or augmented second), is a thread that binds the organism together, finally winding off into limbo at the end.

- INTERMISSION -

QUARTET IN G MINOR, OPUS 10 - - - - - Debussy

Animé et très décidé

Assez vif et bien rythmé

Andantino doucement expressif

Très modéré — Très mouvementé et avec passion

Debussy wrote his only quartet in 1893 and is said to have declared later that, whatever he had had to say in that form, was completely expressed in this one quartet. Music commentators have called it the "masterpiece of the cyclic form". As such, it has become something of a myth. The praise showered on this composition by French writers seems almost incredible at the present time. One of them attributes to this work "much more humanity", "a thousand times more warmth and vitality" than to Beethoven's last quartets of which it is "a kind of continuation". The first quick movement is in sonata form, but the second subject is not recapitulated. The opening theme is reminiscent of the Phrygian mode, using A flat instead of A. The second subject is presented in parallel ninths by the first violin and the viola, to an accompaniment in quiet triplets by the other two instruments. The first part of the development repeats the opening theme with double stops on all four instruments. The recapitulation is preceded by a long pianissimo section, the soft colours of which are mainly provided by the cello. The scherzo alternately presents the initial theme in diminution and in augmentation, whereby a great contrast is achieved. A third form of this theme appears at the end. The slow movement, one of Debussy's most popular compositions, is the only one that does not use the initial theme of the quartet. Its melodic language is obviously inspired by Borodin. The finale is passionate. (To the French commentator quoted above, it suggests an erotic scene which he pictures vividly!) The movement is introduced by a free improvisation, using the initial theme. This theme appears again, forming the second subject of the finale. The end is in the major mode, built upon the diminutive form of the initial theme, which was heard previously in the scherzo movement.